

The Last Summoner Excerpt: Chapter One

Von Grunwald Castle, Prussia, 1410

VIVIANNE bolted awake and flushed despite the coolness of the room. Her head swam in the daze of a disquieting dream. Fritz, the large tabby cat curled at her feet, stretched out a forepaw to her and began to purr loudly. She sat up in her bed and rubbed the sleep out of her eyes with the palms of her hands.

The dawn had just broken. Shafts of sunlight blazed a flaming cross in the shape of her window on the floor beside her. It was as though the burning villages to the southwest had set the sky on fire. Vivianne craned to catch the blood-red sun aching over the horizon. It cast a molten glow over the corn and rye fields and traced long shadowy fingers wherever an obstruction, like a tree or windmill, intersected its flaming path.

Vivianne raked the ruffled hair off her face and raised her knees to hug them. She stared out at the breaking dawn. Her mind lingered on her dream, her recurring nightmare.

In it she was fleeing. She ran along a strangely lit tunnel, tightly clasping the hand of a boy her age, a special friend—her *ritter* perhaps. The tunnel was man-made, like the castle halls but wider and smoother with flat simple paintings on the walls. Through the center of the tunnel ran a chasm with tracks. A strange snake-like machine resembling several rooms with open doors, sat on the track. A familiar and disturbingly handsome man—the devil himself—burst out of one of the doors and chased them. She shrieked with surprise and bolted, clutching the boy's hand in a steely grip. Sparks flew out of the devil and burned her. They coursed through her body and flamed her belly. Her face blazed with a feverish heat as the devil caught up, flames licking her thighs. The boy's hand slipped out of hers and disappeared as the man with the frighteningly beautiful face reached her...*Mary, mother of Jesus!* NO! She knew that if he touched her she'd become his slave. Feeling powerless, her sluggish feet dug deep like in quicksand....Laughing, the devil reached out for her. She felt his scorching touch and screamed—

Vivianne always woke in a cold sweat, perversely aroused. This morning, her belly also ached with a dull throb.

She shook her head to clear it and seized Fritz in an embrace. He reacted by licking her nose. She endured the rasp and fishy smell of his tongue for a few licks then buried her face in his fur. She forced the disturbing images from her mind by contemplating the coming day. But that only crowded her brain with new terrifying thoughts and the thrill of tense excitement stirred in her belly like an animal awakening.

"It's my birthday today, Fritz," she announced to the cat after pulling back. July 14, 1410. She was fourteen years old. Her father and now deceased mother had pledged her since her birth to a stranger from a foreign land on her fourteenth birthday. *Today*—if the rumor was true, that is. Though she'd overheard the entire von Grunwald *Ordensburgen* gossip of it for years, her father had never mentioned it to her. Surely, he would have told her of such an important thing in her life if he'd meant it in earnest. Vivianne sighed and stroked Fritz. Then again, perhaps not, she reflected, summoning the stern image of her taciturn father. He never told her anything. If her mother was alive it might have been different....

Besides, of late her father had much more important things on his mind; like the recent surprise attack on the Teutonic State by the combined Polish-Lithuanian-Masovian forces. They'd crossed the Vistula River and intended to traverse the Dwerca River to take Marienburg Castle,

the Teutonic Order's Capital. A few days ago they'd crossed into Prussia and assaulted the border village of Lautenburg, looting and desecrating the church there; but *Hochmeister* Ulrich von Jungingen and his Teutonic Knights held them off at the fords of Kurzetnik on the Dwerca River.

Late yesterday more dreadful news had come to the baron: the enemy had outflanked von Jungingen's defense; they'd moved northeast and sacked Gilgenburg and were heading straight for Grunwald. Today was the eve of a battle amassing in the fields between Grunwald, Tannenberg and Ludwigsdorf. The Teutonic Knights and their troops were marching the twenty-kilometers from the Dwerca River to cut off the Slavs. They intended to camp later today just a few kilometers from the castle. There they would await the Polish-Lithuanian army who were languishing near Gilgenburg after committing atrocities to the villagers then looting and burning it to the ground. Although von Jungingen had sent some of his commanding knights ahead to von Grunwald castle, the sharp-eyed fifty-year old had stubbornly refused the baron's hospitality in order to stay with the bulk of his troops. Vivianne knew it was more than that. But that was the official story. He and his Hospital *Großmeister*, Werner von Tettingen, would oversee the establishment of their military camp and tabor for horse drawn wagons outside Grunwald. She knew it was really something personal between her father and the *Hochmeister*.

Despite the sudden descent upon the castle of several dozen weary Teutonic Knights, the imminent arrival of a special guest today and the long-arranged feast seemed to confirm Vivianne's suspicions that something was indeed afoot here besides war. Dreaded thoughts of her strange suitor resurfaced. It occurred to her that the very idea of a pre-nuptial feast was discordant with preparations for battle. Then again, perhaps it would help raise their spirits and boost morale if not distraction—even if at her expense.

In any case, the castle household had for days been bustling with the intense urgency of the feast: sweeping the floors and replacing the old mats in the Great Hall with new sweet-smelling ones of grass, flowers and herbs; dusting off the tapestries and decorating the Great Hall; cleaning out the lavatories, stocking and preparing fresh meat and spices from the village farms; baking bread; making new candles and flower arrangements.

As if the battlefield had come to the castle, the whole household rushed about, ill-tempered and nervous. The old cook and his scullions, usually kind-hearted with Vivianne, had become downright cantankerous with her lately whenever she sauntered in to steal an apple or sweet tart. Vivianne had heard from Gunter, one of the baron's young pages that her father had even sent for a band of *minnesängers* from Gilgenburg to attend and entertain at the coming feast. They'd just made it out of there in time now that Gilgenburg had fallen to the Slavs and was burned to the ground.

Vivianne shifted in her bed with flushed thoughts. Did the baron really mean to give her away at this ill time to some old stranger she'd never met? This foreign suitor had to be at least two dozen years her senior if a promise had been made directly to him before Vivianne was even born! Surely, the baron had taken his promise to the realm of the ridiculous. Or was there more to it, she thought, and felt renewed dread chill her. As if sensing her disturbed mood, Fritz meowed and sprang out of her arms.

Vivianne watched her cat leave the room and let her mind cloud with absent thoughts. She hardly knew her father, the baron. She didn't recall ever seeing him when she was a small child. Her earliest memory of him was when she was almost five years old: his sudden appearance in her outer bed-chamber had caught her in mid-speech as she was relating to Uta some made-up story of a heroic knight. The baron had just returned from a two-year campaign in Gotland.

Soiled and stained with fresh blood, he'd burst into the room with his face exhausted but

glowing from his victory. She remembered thinking, as he swept in like a manic wave, that he was a splendid though terrifying sight. Piercing azure eyes flashed with elation beneath a wilderness of tawny brown hair. A true heroic knight like those she fantasized over and Uta told stories about.



He looked the epitome of a warrior, feather-crested *bascinet* helm tucked carelessly under his arm and dressed in plate armor and chain mail from head to toe. His armor was mostly covered by a knee-length white tunic of the Teutonic Knight, belted at the waist by a soft leather girdle from which hung a dagger. The Greek letter 'tau', shaped like a 'T', emblazoned in the front, identified him as a secular member of the Teutonic Order; one who had not taken the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience to God. The mantle was hardly white now; it was smeared and spattered with old and fresh blood and rubbed-in dirt. A leather backhanger *balderich* hung across his chest and the hilt of his splendid longsword was visible behind his shoulder, poking out of a calf-length white cape that flowed recklessly over his great shoulders. The cape was fastened in front with a black enameled silver *ritterkreuz*, the symbol of the Knights of the Teutonic Order; a personal gift from the *Hochmeister* to the baron for his valiant loyalty during the Gotland campaign.

He was truly magnificent, Vivianne had thought. Then he fixed on her a fearsome look and corrected her speech in a deep basso voice that reverberated in her gut like a meal gone awry.

Uta, the only servant who ever stood up to him, scolded, "*Herr* Baron! Look how you've frightened the poor child, your own daughter. And blood from those you've killed still on you! For shame!"

He'd laughed with spiteful amusement. In truth, the fresh blood would have been from a deer hunt in the local forest he'd embarked on immediately upon his return; her father was passionate about hunting and would have missed that more than anything. But Vivianne didn't know this at the time.

Out of mischievous ill-temper and perhaps mostly to annoy Uta, the baron leaned close to Vivianne and reached a filthy blood-smeared hand to touch her face. Even then he drank; his breath reeked with it, though Vivianne didn't know then what it was. Full of frightful heroic stories and Uta's reprove, Vivianne shrank back in fear and might have cried out in fright. The baron straightened with a forced exhale and frowned at Vivianne.

Uta scooped her up into her arms then shoved the baron out with another rebuke as he gruffly handed her the one thing he ever gave Vivianne—a silver jeweled-studded *ritterkreuz* pendant on a gold chain—with a terse instruction that it was a present for the child. Uta commanded him to return only when he was presentable and less forbidding looking.



He never did, Vivianne reflected in bed as she fingered the silver cross that hung around her neck. As if that event had been a test that she'd failed miserably, Vivianne saw him no more until she was old enough to sit at the dinner table beside him in the Great Hall. By then she'd heard the other stories, the vicious gossip about his drunken stupors and temper tantrums, and her ache for his attention and love had lost their way.

These days, when he wasn't glowering at her for doing something wrong, her father ignored her as though she didn't exist. They seldom exchanged any words at the high table of the

Great Hall when he was there. He never responded to her feckless attempts at conversation—as though she wasn't sitting right there beside him. The only time he acknowledged her presence was to correct her eating habits in a gruff rebuke; it always silenced her like a bear's harsh cuff to its cub.

In truth, she seldom saw him. Most of the time he was away on campaigns; often for months, sometimes years, coordinating a raid or skirmish deep in Lithuanian territory. When he was home he spent most of the day behind the great doors of his council room with his war masters and monk warrior colleagues or in meetings with his seneschal, the wiry old Berthold. In the evening he rode to the village just outside the castle to drink and bicker with the gentry and vassal knights of his fief until late at night. Vivianne knew because sometimes he came home with several of them and they would continue their drunken carousing into the early morning. It made her wish her bedroom in the keep, which used to be her mother's solar, lay farther away from the Great Hall.

On days when he held his long war-meetings with Brethren Knight guests visiting from the various nearby convents, they'd finally emerge from the council room into the Great Hall late at night and drink hard; the Teutonic monks liked their wine and ale. Amidst the lively sounds of late-night feasting, she heard desultory shouts of war against the Slavs, "those damned filthy pagans", impassioned calls for the Holy Roman Crusade of the "*Drang nach Osten*" the "*Ostsiedlung*" and the need for a growing "*Ordenstaat*".

Driven by curiosity, Vivianne often slipped out of bed and crept down the hall to park herself behind the thick curtains and eaves-drop. She learned a lot about military affairs of the Order as a result, and suspected that this was where many of the real decisions were finalized.

Vivianne recalled such a gathering just two weeks ago; she'd been specifically mentioned. Her father was entertaining an eclectic group of vassal and *Knechten* knights, as well as several Brethren of the Order. Rife with tension since rumors of a Polish-Lithuanian build up, late-night drinking in the Great Hall had ignited some blistering quarrels.



"It's not enough that *Hochmeister* von Jungingen has concentrated his forces in Schwetz—"

"He's left the largest part of the Order in Ragneta, Rhein and Memel," her father cut in with a condescending voice. She pictured him glowering with cerulean eyes and his sensual lips held in their usual purse. "It's a good plan, Sigiswald, considering what those infidels are up to in the east."

"The Poles aren't that stupid, Ulrich. They've got some other plan with Lithuania. Those two cousins—"

"Are that stupid!" her father shouted back in a strident voice slurred with liquor. Vivianne imagined his thick lips pouting. "They're so busy fighting each other they haven't the time or ability to fight us. They're pagan idiots, Sigiswald!"

"Jagiello got himself baptized, didn't you hear?" a new tenor voice Vivianne didn't recognize piped up. "When he married Jagwida, the Polish heiress, and made himself King of Poland. He's been a Roman Catholic for over twenty years; they *all* are. Poles and Lithuanians. Both you and von Jungingen underestimate them. They're *not* pagan idiots—"

"What are you saying, Count von Wendem! Are you demented?" Someone mocked loudly. Vivianne recognized the impassioned basso voice of Heinrich von Plauen the Elder, one of her father's Brethren guests from Schwetz. The forty year old was one of her father's more vociferous and opinionated colleagues: "You dare challenge our *Ordenstaat*! The Duke of Masovia

summoned our Order here two hundred years ago to subdue the Prussian pagans. *Reichsfürst* Hermann von Salza had a commission authorized by the pope to Christianize the pagan lands of the Baltic Region. He took it as a sign to bring the fear of God to these wild barbarians."

"Fear indeed," the count said sullenly. "Starting with Truso, I suppose... That's if you call killing all the Prussians and leveling their cities to ash Christianizing... I call it something else..."

"*Meister* Hermann Balk did what needed to be done. He founded Elbing. It became one of the League's greatest seaports for northern trade."

There followed a bitter laugh. "Yes, *after* he 'purged the Vistula spit of the insult of the infidels'."

"It was God's wish. They were barbarians. They refused to be baptized."

"Did they even get a chance?" von Wendem challenged. "And what about Danzig, Chelmno, and Dobrzyn? Were they all God's wish? Massacring most of the Polish citizens then replacing them with German immigrants. Is *that* Christianizing?" After a pause, von Wendem added pointedly, "Now that the Poles and Lithuanians *are* Christians what are we doing?"

"You *are* an infant!" von Plauen scoffed. "Slavs may call themselves Christians but under those official Christian skins breathe healthy Godless heathens. That Lithuanian prince, Jagiello, pretended to become a Christian only so he could marry Jagwida to win the Polish crown. Those mass baptisms he ordered for Lithuanians were a sham. They still pray to their thunderbolt warrior god, *Perkūnas*. And what about those pagan Tartars from the Golden Horde? Are *they* Christians? Eh?...*eh?*" he taunted; he was probably poking von Wendem in the chest. "Bah! Conversion, my ass!" Vivianne pictured him suddenly leaning back with a conceited scowl. "They're apostates. Let me remind you, von Wendem, that it wasn't too long ago when they roasted our captured brethren alive in their armor, like chestnuts, before the shrine of their evil pagan gods!"

"Hear! Hear!"

"Or shot our brethren full of arrows while bound to one of their stinking sacred trees!" shouted another.

Several voices rose in a chorus of drunken agreement followed by a desultory raucous of shouting: "I remember!" "Yeah, poor Udo."

"Or what about all the desecrations of our churches, their alters, and crucifixes. They spit on and crushed the conse-crated wafers of the host...they tortured and killed the village women and children..."

"As though we didn't do the same—"

"They're the pestilential enemies of Christ!"

"A good Slav is a dead Slav!"

"Vytautas is a devil!"

"The *Hochmeister* is right: we should wipe out all the infidels!"

Amid the rabble, the count's tenor voice piped up again, as if he didn't know what was good for him: "I still think the Order made a mistake taking Pomerelia. Poland was our ally against the pagan Prussians and Lithuanians—"

"Someone teach this *bauernlümmel* some history!" von Plauen cut in. Vivianne heard a loud clink of a mug on a table. "It was a strategic move, you idiot. Just like with Samogitia. Pomerelia connected our monastic state with the borders of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nations. Besides, we relinquished Kuyavia and Dobrzyń to them in the Treaty of Kalisz."

"Only to declare war on Jagiello and his cousin, Vytautas, last year—"

"Who's side are you on, Grabie?" Vivianne's father burst out.

The count persisted, "I counseled *Hochmeister* von Jungingen against war with Poland.

But he let his hatred for them get the better of him—”

The baron cut in, “The *Hochmeister* had no choice after the tribal uprising in Samogitia—”

“After he put an unreasonable embargo in place—”

“Unreasonable!” von Plauen scoffed. “Both Jagiello and Vytautas were secretly helping the rebels, you idiot! It was collusion all along!”

“The *Hochmeister* knows *exactly* what he’s doing!” the baron added passionately.

“Ulrich! You sly bastard!” Vivianne heard a loud smack: von Plauen clapping her father on the back, perhaps. “Have you patched things up with the *Hochmeister*?”

“Ulrich von Jungingen never trusted me...especially after....” Her father trailed.

“You were always Conrad’s boy, I know; your namesake never trusted you for your loyalties to his older brother, eh? Conrad didn’t want the Order to vote his younger brother in as *Hochmeister*...but we did anyway...”

After a slight pause, during which everyone probably recharged their drinks, von Plauen added, “I hear a plan in your confidence, Ulrich. Perhaps it’s some new contraption like your wife’s crazy plumbing, or that smelly gas you heat your castle with, eh? Does this have to do with your daughter’s impending fourteenth birthday, Ulrich? An offering the *Hochmeister* can’t refuse, eh? You do have some interesting friends...”

Vivianne felt her heart pound up her throat. Had he meant this stranger, her intended, coming on her birthday?

Her father’s voice had a smug ring, “You’ll see. There shall be a feast. After this the *Hochmeister* will have to forgive my previous transgression...”

“Very interesting friends...”

The party naturally dissolved into a drunken disorder and the tittering nervous laughter of women filled the halls, as various knights and gentry caught them in eager embraces. Vivianne recognized several of her father’s favorite servant maids. Even a few of the brethren partook to Vivianne’s astonishment. They were sworn celibate monks, but not all of them held their vows, she concluded. Vivianne hastily crept back to her bedchamber and tried to sing herself to sleep.

She was still awake, curled in her bed, when her father’s clumsy stumbling gait and slurring raucous shouts to himself echoed in the hall near her room. Like every other time, he hesitated by her door. And like every other time she prayed that he wouldn’t barge in, stinking of stale beer and old cheese, and touch her like a father should never touch his own child.

He’d only done it once, a month ago, when rumor of the Polish-Lithuanian forces amassing near Danzig and Samogitia had fired his rage and he’d tried to douse it with more ale. He’d roused her out of a deep sleep by throwing off her covers to give her a good look and had remarked on how like a woman she’d become of late, tall and blossoming. Then he’d bent close, rank breath blowing over her face. He mauled her small firm breasts with unseemly eagerness and smacked his wet lips against hers, thrusting his tongue into her mouth. She’d pushed him gruffly off her with a muffled shriek then gasped and involuntarily wiped her mouth as he stumbled back and nearly fell. She thought for a terrified moment that he would be angry and beat her. But his eyes looked suddenly fearful and he shuffled quickly out of her room, closing her door with unexpected gentleness. In truth, he’d never laid an angry hand on her, despite the many times he’d railed at her, consumed by rage for some little thing she did or simply was. She could never please him, it seemed. And had stopped trying to.



Vivianne pulled down the covers and examined her girlish figure, revealed through the flimsy night shift she wore. Despite her not yet having begun to flower with the woman’s cycle,

her hips and breasts had begun to fill out. But she'd grown overly tall and was still too slim for a decent lady. Succumbing to a wistful moment, Vivianne pushed up her breasts with her hands so that she could see cleavage, then let go with a sigh. Did she remind her father of her dead mother?

She hastily disrobed and before putting on the clothes laid out for her, Vivianne made a swift appraisal of herself in the full-length mirror. She twisted her head to gaze at the reflection of her backside and inhaled sharply. The persistent rash of purple blemishes on her buttocks had increased in size and intensity. They'd migrated up her back! *What is happening to me?* She'd developed the odd purple markings almost a year ago, the same time her disturbing dreams had begun. At first the spots had appeared yellow-green, like a spate of bruises. Then, like ripening fruit, they'd blushed to deep purple and rose up like welts.

Alarmed by the markings, Uta had whispered of the plague. Vivianne knew it wasn't the plague; she knew plague symptoms and suffered none of them. She'd heard a rumor of such markings on her mother's back; pagan markings they'd called them, the mark of God's displeasure with her mother's strange ways. Nevertheless, Vivianne had to assure a frightened Uta that she suffered no ill effects. Uta had interrogated her with a string of symptoms: "Are you sure that you've no chills or fever, child?" And before Vivianne could even respond Uta had clapped her hand against her forehead. "No pains or headaches? No dizziness? No visions?" Vivianne insisted that she didn't and grew more irritated. "You've not coughed up any blood, My Lady..."

"No, no, NO!" Vivianne had finally shouted in exasperation and twitched out of Uta's grasp.

Fearing close examination by the castle physician, Vivianne had insisted that Uta not mention it to the doctor or her father. The doctor would only consult his astrological books, poke her skin for blood and force her to give him her urine and stool only to place leeches on her rash and bleed her until she was giddy. In response, Uta had filled the girl's room with the scent of roses, violets, bay leaves, fennel and mint to ward away the plague. She'd also firmly persevered in her demand that Vivianne turn to the Penitential Psalms in her Book of Hours during her six prayer times. Vivianne didn't have to consult her Hours; she knew them by heart. She'd uttered them often enough for her many transgressions: *Domine, ne in furore tuo arguas me, neque in ira tua corripas me*—she knew them in Latin and in German—*O Lord, rebuke me not in Thy furor; nor chastise me in Thy wrath. For thy arrows are fastened in me: and Thy hand hath descended upon me....There is no health in my flesh in the face of Thy wrath: there is no peace for my bones in the face of my sins....*

Sadly, she barely got in two prayers in a day, and those only occurred thanks to her morning and afternoon instructions with *Père* Daniel in the chapel library and scriptorium. However, Vivianne surely made up for her lack of prayers with the intensity of her prayers. And she certainly knew them all, every penitential psalm and litany, every invocation and joy of the Virgin. It was a vicious circle, Vivianne reflected sadly: her doubts of God's presence motivated her lapse in prayers; invariably followed by feelings of great shame for such heretical thoughts, which inspired more penitential prayers.

For two weeks, Uta, who was also skilled in the use of natural herbs and medicines, arrived every morning before Vivianne rose from bed with a regular breakfast of smoked herring or rollmops and a roll with butter and whole milk and a steaming hempseed pottage to balance the humors. Vivianne, who normally did not partake in a substantial breakfast, usually gave the cat the herring, drank the milk, and threw the rest down the toilet. Uta also prepared a foul-smelling poultice of mashed nettle leaves and seeds, butterbur, blessed thistle, angelica, mint, treacle and common rue, mixed with egg and urine—probably a dog's. Uta intended to apply it

on the infected area each morning, but Vivianne had sternly insisted that Uta just give it to her with instructions on how to apply it herself.

For the first few days Vivianne had loyally applied it. After Uta's repeated inquiries, Vivianne lost her patience and lied: the poultice, combined with the pottage, had worked and the rash had vanished. In truth, it had not abated. The poultice stank and Vivianne, seeing no effect, had abandoned using the herbal remedy and flushed the vile mash down the *garderobe* along with the uneaten food. Because the rash didn't burn or itch, Vivianne decided to just live with it. But she vowed to no longer reveal her naked body to anyone, including Uta, who was like a mother to her. To the old nursemaid's dismay, Vivianne insisted on bathing and changing on her own. Another eccentricity of hers that would displease her father if he cared enough to notice.

The list was endless, Vivianne thought soberly. She poured water from the silver ewer on the small chest into its accompanying basin and dipped her hands and a small washcloth to briskly wash her face. She paused for a moment to gaze through the water at the *repoussé* relief of the basin that showed the young Actaeon bursting in on the bathing Goddess Diana. In the myth, the angry goddess punished the poor boy for his mistake by setting his own dogs to tear him to pieces. Vivianne glanced at the ewer that matched the basin, its relief depicting Jupiter's deceitful seduction of Callisto in the forest. After studying the ewer more carefully, Vivianne decided that it looked more like an abduction than a mutual tryst.

She hastily washed then threw on a cotton shift. Ignoring the bright pink gown laid out for her, she chose out of her wardrobe a plain form-fitting one of dark green brocade with reasonable décolletage then shrugged into it, pulling here and there and fastening the buttons in the back with deft hands. Looking in the full-stand mirror, she adjusted the *cross-pattée* pendant on her gold chain—the only gift her father had ever given her—that hung just over her still small bosom and realized that her hands were trembling. What would today bring? Her father's next and last gift? Her betrothed: an old crusty knight thirty years her senior—

"Hallo, *Hase!*" Uta announced her presence with a trilling singsong then entered Vivianne's room in a bustle of nervous energy. "Ahh!" she expostulated, finding Vivianne up and dressed already, though not in the clothes she'd laid out for the girl. "Happy birthday, *kleine Hase!*"

Uta rushed to Vivianne and gave her a full matronly squeeze that made Vivianne smile despite the portent of the day. In contrast to all of Vivianne's dresses, Uta's beige kirtle and russet barbet, fastened over the plain wimple that covered her chin and neck, was shapeless and made of rough linen. And it covered every bit of her, except her wrinkled face and hands.

"I saw your father. He's in a fine mood for your birthday and your special handing off. I haven't seen him this merry in ages. He must be proud and happy for you, child."

He's just glad to see me go, Vivianne thought to herself. She blurted out morosely, "My father hates me."

"Of course he doesn't, child!" Uta expostulated. Vivianne thought Uta's denial suspiciously exaggerated. "How can you say such a thing! Of course he doesn't hate you," she repeated as if to convince herself.

"I'm of no use to him," Vivianne muttered. She should have been a boy; at least then she could have served as a knight in the baron's castle. Perhaps then he might have liked her a little....

"What ever are you thinking, child! Of course you're useful. You're a lady!" Then she murmured on as if to herself, "Though at times I dare say you don't act like one...As for the baron, it's just that..." She cut herself off and patted Vivianne on the shoulders then pulled fretfully at the sleeves as if to fix them. "Well, just don't you go and let anything ruin this special day for you. You know that your father has a special gift for you—"

"It's just *what?*" Vivianne persisted with an ill-humored frown. She already knew what her father's *special* gift for her was: some querulous smelly warrior, who would haul her to his castle where the kind of freedom she'd enjoyed thanks to her father's neglect would no doubt be severely curtailed. The stranger would have her do his every bidding and surely impose his will upon her in his bed. She felt like throwing up at the thought.

Uta smoothed out Vivianne's dress, eyes flitting over her and unable to keep her gaze. "Well...when your mother—when she—when you were born..." *'When your mother died giving birth to you'*, Vivianne knew Uta had started to say. "...that's when your father took to drinking again. He grieved her loss so much, tiny *Hase*."

"I'm not so tiny," Vivianne murmured to her old nursemaid's endearment. She was still mulling over the old ache Uta had brought up. She didn't like that her father drank so much. It made him act foolish. And it made him cruel. Vivianne had ached for his attention since she could remember. Now that he gave it to her, she wished he wouldn't. And felt guilty for being here instead of her mother.

"No, I suppose you aren't, child!" Uta chortled sadly. "But when your mother passed away, it was like a piece of the baron went with her, like he was broken."

He still blames me, Vivianne considered.

"I remember what he was like before she died, My Lady," Uta went on. "He stopped drinking." Vivianne appreciated Uta's honesty. Uta sat on the bed and Vivianne saw her eyes glaze with memories. "He was full of life. Like you are, My Lady. He was...happy. Before Lady Dianne came along, your father was a sad drunk. He'd lost his first wife to the *Holy Fire* in eighty-nine. Did you know? Ah, yes...Doctor called it *ignis sacer*. T'was an awful thing to see. She was so young and beautiful, the Lady Rosamund, almost as young as you are now, with round cheeks like roses and a beautiful laugh and so helpful in the village. Then she went mad with visions of evil things attacking her and being burned at the stake. She lost her limbs to *mormal* and died in agony, poor child. Several children and women in the village also got the same sickness..." Uta shook her head in sad remembrance. Vivianne knew that Uta's own husband and two of her children had succumbed to that awful disease. "They say it was witches who called the devil, tormenting their fellow creatures with sores and disease," Uta went on. "I was but a wee child when an angry God—or more of Satan's witchery—visited us with the Black Plague in sixty-three. T'was awful. I lost my whole family to it. My parents, my sister and brother."

"I'm sorry," Vivianne said in a subdued voice. "I didn't know, Uta." Vivianne felt some shame that she hadn't before learned this vital fact about her old nursemaid, who'd brought her up like her own child. Vivianne had known about the old woman losing her husband and two of her children to the *Holy Fire* in eighty-nine; but she'd known nothing of Uta's own childhood family. She silently watched Uta who had gone quiet for a moment and found the old woman staring out past her into space. Into the past, Vivianne supposed, and wondered how many siblings Uta had lost along with her parents. She must have wondered why she alone had survived, Vivianne mused somberly, and suddenly felt very sorry for her old nursemaid whose fate she'd only now discovered. Vivianne remembered Uta telling her of how she'd been taken in by the von Grunwald household when she was thirteen; Vivianne quickly did the math: Uta was sixty years old this year; so, the baron's mother had taken Uta in right after losing her family.

Uta roused. "It took the baron's father too, Konrad von Grunwald, did you know? It happened when your father was a wee boy of four. Left the place to the Lady Baronin." Then Uta fixed on Vivianne a more intense look. "Did you know that your father ran away from home when he was ten?"

Vivianne leaned forward and shook her head, urging Uta on. It was a mystery why Uta was telling her all this now, but she didn't want to spoil Uta's train of thought and listened

attentively.

"His uncle Wilhelm, who was a monk knight with the Teutonic Order, wanted your father to take the vows and join too. Even then the baron knew he was meant to love women, child. A life of celibacy would have destroyed him. But the uncle persuaded the mother and they would have forced the boy. So he ran away. He ended up with a secular order under another lord and your father became one of the land's best knights. He became known for his brilliant strategy in warfare and his great sword-fighting skills. When his mother died, the baron returned to his rightful place as lord of the castle. It's passing strange that he is now working for the Teutonic Order anyway, though not as an avowed Brother."

Vivianne had only a moment to reflect on how little her own father knew his parents, when Uta continued, "Temper and that awful drunken behavior aside, I must say that your father loves the ladies—and they him."

Vivianne could see that in her father. He had a kind of penetrating intensity in his regard and a sensual way of carrying himself that was no doubt attractive to women. And she'd seen him with them; apart from the old crones, any woman was fair game for his charms.

Uta's gaze strayed to the sketch of Vivianne's mother by her bedside. "How you do resemble that exotic French beauty, meine Hase! Your shiny long brown hair, your cheeks and mouth."

Her mother was indeed beautiful, Vivianne thought, staring longingly at the painting of her mother by the bed. If it had been rendered accurately, Vivianne saw why her father had fallen for the Lady Dianne; she was the most beautiful woman Vivianne had ever laid eyes on. Despite what Uta said, Vivianne had no misconceptions of having inherited her mother's beauty, although she decided that her large hazel eyes were earnest—when she wasn't beguiling her staff for favors like sweets from the cook. And her wide mouth was sincere—except when she was tormenting Wolfgang. It seemed that she was destined to be tall like her mother however. *Exotic*, Uta said. Vivianne knew what that meant for *her*; she didn't resemble the full-figured ladies Father kept inviting to the castle. *They* weren't skinny and gawky with unruly hair, big teeth and a grin that looked like two parentheses in an angular face. They weren't still waiting to be women.

Misunderstanding Vivianne's morose thoughts, Uta quickly offered, "You are rather comely for a child. You have a nice complexion and beautiful teeth." Vivianne bit back a wry laugh at Uta's intended compliment. Uta was one to talk of teeth; what teeth she had were rotten, brown and broken. "You still have some filling out to do," Uta went on, peering down the length of Vivianne's torso under thick furry brows. "But you're showing lots of promise, dear. You'll be a beauty when you grow up, you'll see." That was a kind way of saying she didn't measure up, Vivianne thought. "You've also inherited your handsome father's long straight nose and firm chin, my little *Hase*."

"I'm nothing like him!" Vivianne retorted. She hadn't seen any resemblance between herself and her debauched father. Vivianne shared nothing of her father's Germanic nose of aristocratic hubris, his cold and commanding azure eyes or his sensually cruel mouth that he seemed to hold in a permanent pout of disdain. She felt like an orphan and had frequently imagined that she was. "We share nothing," she said.

"Oh, and his stubborn unreasonable temper too, my little scamp!" Uta added with twinkling eyes and a wry tooth-gapped smile. Uta then stared out the window into the past. "As for *Herr* Baron and the Lady Dianne, I'd never seen two people more in love. Then she was pregnant so soon. It was a shame..."

It *was* a shame, Vivianne agreed in morbid silence. A shame the couple hadn't had a chance at a life together before Vivianne came along and ended it all.

She'd wished desperately that she could have known her mother. Vivianne knew very little about her, except that her name was French like Vivianne's. Her mother simply appeared one day. They'd fallen instantly in love and were married right away. She died giving birth to Vivianne a short nine months later. It was only after she died that the rumors began to circulate: of her strange behavior and mysterious identity; of pagan markings on her back, her arcane knowledge of weird things like the revolutionary plumbing system or "biogas" heating system she'd installed in the castle or innovative agricultural practices she'd introduced to the village farmers.

Apparently, she'd also dabbled in alchemy and had earned the disdain of the doctor as a result. It was rumored in turn that her mother was arrogant and did not respect the doctor. The dark castle walls carried whispers that Dianne had been punished by God because she was a heretic and a witch.

When Vivianne was ten years old, Uta had shown her the small decorated leather chest her mother had bequeathed to her. Although she'd kept her thoughts to herself, the strange items and books she'd found inside had compelled Vivianne to wonder if they weren't right about her mother being a witch. The function of some of the items still eluded Vivianne.

Vivianne felt betrayed somehow by the mother she'd never known. A woman who had otherwise flouted convention, who displayed a healthy ego and espoused independence and unconventionality for womankind. Why had she given in to convention on this one account that involved her only daughter, and complied in that unfair promise to give Vivianne away to some strange man from a foreign country?

"Were you there?" Vivianne blurted out her question.

"*What?* When she gave birth to you? Oh, *Guter Gott!*" Uta raised her hands in sad exasperation. "No, child. I wish I'd been there to midwife your poor mother." Before Vivianne had a chance to steer her to her real question, Uta blustered on, "Alas, she went into labor early; I'd given her some cockspurs but I didn't think they'd work so fast. And she had corruption and dropsy and wouldn't let Doctor Grien look at her." Uta shook her head sadly. "Oh, she hated the doctor, child!" Vivianne knew the feeling was mutual. Did the 'good' doctor question the nobility of Vivianne's mother? He probably suspected her of low birth, like himself, and had reason to despise her for that alone. Uta went on, "I was at the town fair in Gilgenburg and no one came to fetch me—I had no idea. When I returned she was already dead and you, child, were born."

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"I wish I could have helped the poor woman," Uta lamented. "She already had a bit of a fever and chills and some foul-smelling discharge from the barbolle. I suspected a womb fever. She complained of headache, dizziness and blurry vision, then she had awful pains in the abdomen and started to vomit. I told her to see the physician for the corruption but she refused and said she was taking her own medicine—something called hydrazine and some other thing I can't remember—and she was drinking hibiscus tea. I gave her some chamomile with foxglove and horseradish before I left. But then she went into early labor and Marthe said her contractions wouldn't stop. She fell into a dreadful fever and started to bleed heavily. Marthe said it flowed like a waterfall from her birthing chair and made a great big puddle on the floor. Your mother asked Marthe to give her something from her kit but the poor girl was too frightened. And then the Lady suffered awful seizures. That's when the good doctor came."

Vivianne swallowed convulsively. Part of her des-perately wanted Uta to stop. But another part of her was mesmerized with the need to hear all the morbid details. She clung to every word as the cheerfully complying Uta shared on:

"Doctor Grien said later that your mother had *eclampsia*. They feared you would be lost with her seizures. *Gott sei Dank* that *Herr* doctor acted fast! Or we might have lost everyone!" Then she leaned forward and added, as if sharing a conspiracy, "Of course, he had orders from the baron to save *you* no matter what."

Vivianne's mouth went dry and she swallowed involuntarily. Not her mother?

"The chaplain was there too so the Lady Dianne thankfully received *Extreme Unction* before she passed on. But she refused the *Confession*, poor thing; her mind had already gone. Frieda said that your mother yelled profanities at both the priest and the good doctor and wanted some 'anti-beeatic'...or something like that. Frieda didn't understand the words. Neither did the doctor, it seemed, though your mother thought he should. Your mother called him a superstitious charlatan and a butcher and accused him of deliberately killing her. It got really ugly," Uta ended with a sad shake of her head. "She wanted the Doctor to poke a needle with liquid in her, she kept pointing to her kit and shouting for some 'magneeziasuffet' or so. When he finally did get out a needle, she changed her mind, called it coumadin, and said it would kill her. He gave it to her anyway, despite her struggles and screams. I think he thought her mad with the devil by then. According to Frieda, your mother screamed at everyone, calling us all primitive bumpkins and this place a barbaric hinterland. Then the devil took her completely and she had such a fit of convulsions, *Herr* doctor had to cut you out of her before you died too."

Vivianne felt her face and throat tighten and found it hard to breathe.

"*Guter Gott*, even after all that bleeding and in her dying state it took four of them to hold her down as *Herr* Doctor cut her open. I would have given her some dwale at least to dull the pain. They say her death screams rang through the entire castle into the courtyard and beyond the outer bailey as the priest anointed her with unguent."

Vivianne felt ill. *Do I really need to hear this?* But some-thing prevented her from stopping Uta.

"He had to shout out the *Last Rites* over her screams," Uta relentlessly went on. "But your mother refused the *Viaticum*."

Of course she would, Vivianne thought scathingly, picturing her mother screaming in agony as the doctor cut her open. How could they expect her to blithely accept the *Eucharist* as she writhed in excruciating pain?

"Marthe said that at the precise moment your mother ceased to scream you started to cry."

Vivianne shivered. That hadn't been her question and it was far more information than she had wanted to hear just now. "I mean," she said shakily, "were you there when *he* came...and my parents promised me to him."

Uta's face paled. "Ah..." She abruptly stood up, suddenly nervous, and tapped her head as if she'd just remembered an urgent chore. She smoothed out the bed and let her eyes flit only momentarily on Vivianne. "I must see Frieda about the laundry, child!" Then she left in a flurry of nervous motion, leaving Vivianne confused in her wake. Why did this man—her intended—inspire such fear among the castle staff?